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CHAPTER FOUR

THE EXPERIENCE AND LONG-TERM IMPACT OF STUDY ABROAD BY EUROPEANS IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

JAMES A. COLEMAN AND TONY CHAFER

Introduction

Academic mobility is often fun, but its principal justification is as a learning experience. The expanding research literature on the educational phenomenon which is variously known as academic mobility, study abroad, or by at least a dozen other labels, tends to focus on one or more of six categories of learning outcome: academic, cultural, intercultural, linguistic, personal and professional (Coleman & Parker 2001, Coleman 2007, Coleman 2009a). Coleman (2009b) has estimated that nearly half of the published research accounts concern Second Language Acquisition (SLA), but increasing attention is also paid to the ways in which the new context impacts upon the individual's identity, their awareness of and openness to a diversity of cultures, and their emergence as intercultural mediators. A relatively small number of studies has addressed the gains in vocational or professional insights and the longer-term career choices of sojourners. Perhaps surprisingly, given that one of the few constants of study abroad research is its location within a formal educational context, little attention has been given to academic outcomes.

There is no doubt that a well designed study abroad programme can lead to gains in all six domains, but it is equally clear that, despite folk wisdom that immersion must lead to linguistic fluency, an appreciation of cultural diversity, and a capacity to operate maturely and effectively in any new situation, such gains are by no means automatic. The eccentricities of the context combine with the personality, outlook and aims of the student to produce outcomes which are predictable only to a limited extent. While research can successfully discern patterns of student learning, a high level

of variation within and across studies is a distinguishing feature of study abroad research. Some of the variability is systematic, and although Coleman (Coleman 2009b) has attempted to define the contextual variables (such as *encadrement*, accommodation and formal tuition arrangements) which may correlate with differences in outcome, other differences result from the high individual variation found even within coherent groups of participants.

Learning outcomes are, of course, just one of the features of study abroad, and while working with real individuals may prove an obstacle to easy generalisations, it also embodies the fascination of study abroad research, especially in the light of the “social turn” in SLA and study abroad research. Within the field of academic mobility, the social turn is evidenced by a number of in-depth qualitative studies focusing in more detail on the personal changes triggered by contact with new cultural settings. Such studies (Dervin 2008, Ehrenreich 2004, de Federico 2005, Isabelli-García 2006, Jackson 2008, Kinginger 2008, Murphy-Lejeune 2002, Papatsiba 2003, Pellegrino Aveni 2005) relate to individual sojourners, their fluid poststructural identities, their personal narratives, the formation and development of social networks, and changing perceptions of self and of other. Study abroad has also been shown to frequently have a profound long-term impact on participants’ professional lives and where they subsequently travel and live (Akande & Slawson 2000, Dwyer 2004, Oppen et al. 1990, Parey & Waldinger 2007, Teichler 1997), and although a minority will “turn the page” and choose to put the whole experience behind them, “those who enjoyed the YA [year abroad] tend to follow careers which allow them to be intercultural mediators” (Alred & Byram 2006: 230, cf. Alred & Byram 2002).

Summarising research findings across so many domains cannot be done briefly; the most recent book-length overview of SLA in study abroad (Kinger 2009) alone contains well over 300 references. Coleman is, however, engaged in writing a book designed to provide a comprehensive picture. The present study seeks to build on in-depth studies, while not neglecting the more conventional issue of language gain. It also seeks to acknowledge the variation across both time and place in the context of study abroad.

The authors believe that an extreme contrast between the home and host contexts may throw up conventional issues in a heightened form, as well as issues specific to the individual programme. Senegal is a developing country whose climate, culture, belief system and linguistic profile could hardly be more different from the temperate, predominantly white, English-speaking Western European country that is the United

Kingdom. And while much is known of the experience of African students in Europe, we have found virtually no studies of European students in Africa. However, US student Demetri Blanas prefaces his study abroad report on Senegal (Blanas 2008) with reflections on going through a number of phases, from “almost a state of shock” through “a phase of disillusionment” to an appreciation of another way of living. He writes of gaining insight into the culture, the extended family structures, and the “communal systems of support” which are absent from US society (Blanas 2008: 17). He required both Wolof and French for his interviews, and his future medical career will be shaped by the recognition that health issues cannot be addressed without “a comprehensive understanding of the cultural factors involved” (Blanas 2008: 18).

The present article concentrates on student profiles, accommodation, homesickness, language progress and its relationship with language contact and the length of stay, ethnicity, gender, and social networks during and following the stay abroad. Lack of space precludes in-depth coverage here of several aspects of the study abroad experience which are highly relevant, namely religion, sex, links with home, non-linguistic learning outcomes and subsequent employment. Separate articles will be devoted in due course to these facets of academic mobility.

The questionnaire research reported, conceived as the first part of a two-part study, was designed to provide both quantitative data and a limited amount of qualitative data, while establishing contact with informants and seeking agreement to a subsequent interview. The findings of the questionnaire study will inform the projected interview study, for which external funding will be sought, and in which all respondents have expressed willingness to participate.

The goal of the study was to explore the experience of study abroad in the particular context of Francophone West Africa, and the longer-term impact of the experience on the former students involved. Rather than focusing on a single cohort of students, the present study involved students whose study abroad took place during a span of over two decades. By covering such a wide timespan, it was hoped:

- to identify continuing features of the context and of students' experiences there
- to capture changes in the context which might have impacted on the experience, in particular new developments in telecommunications
- to trace the longer-term impact of the study abroad experience on the attitudes, employment and life path of the students involved.

It was hypothesised that, in respect of some questionnaire items, results would add to the existing broad picture of how students live and behave during study abroad, and what they gain from the experience. In other respects, the questionnaire was expected to reveal findings related to the specific context. It was anticipated that the long-term impact on individuals would in some respects reflect earlier studies, but would also show distinctive patterns tied to the specific African experience. All these hypotheses were borne out by the data.

Context

Situated at the end of a peninsula, Dakar is the capital of Senegal, a former French colony which gained its independence in 1960. Senegal is a multi-party democracy and its economy, dominated by agriculture, fishing, and recently tourism, is one of the most stable in West Africa. Most *Sénégalais* are multilingual: while French is an official language, Wolof is the most widely used. The population is overwhelmingly Muslim, with some distinctive local practices, some animism, and a minority of Catholics. The population of Dakar, the administrative centre of the country and home to several national and regional institutions, is over a million, with some 2.5 million in the metropolitan area. The sprawling, congested city has, like many big, bustling cities in developing countries, an over-strained infrastructure and widespread poverty. Although Senegal is far from the poorest country in Africa, annual earnings for the average *Sénégalais* are one-twentieth of those in the United Kingdom, so it is no surprise that all *toubabs* (Europeans), even students, are perceived as wealthy. Outside the rainy season (July to September, when students are not there), the climate is hot and dry. Tourists are attracted by the sights of Dakar, by the nearby and beautiful *Île de Gorée* with its museum of slavery, and by the resorts along the sunny coastline.

The local population is black; all but one of the respondents to the questionnaire are white Europeans. The second author established an exchange between Portsmouth and Dakar in the mid-1980s and has coordinated it since then. The link person at the University of Dakar organises initial accommodation for the incoming students, and is also available to advise and support. His work is supplemented by departing *stagiaires*, who meet newcomers at the airport (which is, in the words of one respondent, “one of the worst impressions Senegal gives”). In return, the University of Portsmouth hosts each year a French-language *lecteur* selected from Dakar’s highest achieving graduates.

While it has been traditional since colonial days for African students to come to Europe—Léopold Senghor, first President of Senegal and a Nobel Prize winner for literature, studied in France—it is highly unusual for European students to go to Africa, as indeed it is for North Americans: “in 2001-2002, under 3 percent of American students studying abroad went to Africa” (Altbach 2004: 22). We are not aware of any other comparable scheme involving sub-Saharan Africa.

The British Council is responsible for sending English language assistants across the world, and until recently, in a separate programme, placed three UK graduates a year at the British-Senegalese Institute in Dakar.

Method

The first phase of the study is based on a questionnaire, although funding is being sought for follow-up interviews. The questionnaire draws on existing knowledge and, where available, on existing instruments, and was piloted and revised before administration.

For convenience and cost reasons, the initial questionnaires were sent as an email attachment rather than by post. Although the sending institution had not systematically collected students’ personal email addresses, a number were on file.

Once ethical and data protection approval had been obtained, an email (Appendix 1) with a questionnaire attachment (Appendix 2) was sent in early June 2009 to a total of 63 students who were believed to have spent time on work placement in Senegal. Messages to 21 addresses (16 individuals) were returned as undeliverable. During July and August, a reminder was sent to those who apparently had a valid email address but who had not so far responded.

By 27 August 2009, responses had been received from 32 students. Data from closed questionnaire items was entered into a PASW Statistics (formerly SPSS) 17 spreadsheet for analysis.

In late June 2009, an identical questionnaire was sent to the 21 individuals who had worked as English language assistants in Dakar since 2001. By 27 August, 3 responses had been received. The present analysis concerns responses from the 32 former students and 3 former assistants, but statistics refer only to the former.

The email had been carefully worded in order to maximise response rate and to elicit valuable data even on sensitive issues through open-ended questions, while also meeting the very strictest ethical constraints. The approach was vindicated by the good response rate, the robust

statistics from closed questions, and over 22,000 words of commentary on the eight open questions. Self-report, with its potential for inaccurate self-portrayal, is a limitation of all questionnaire data, but in this study the use of email—to judge from the frequency of typos and grammatical non-sequiturs in the open answers—has typically prompted spontaneous and revealingly frank rather than carefully crafted and edited responses. This does not mean, however, that responses do not show evidence of a reflective process having taken place. Many aspects of the Dakar experience have seemingly become integrated into the memories and life history of the respondents, who can thus draw on a narrative already rehearsed with friends and family and at employment interviews. The expression may therefore not always be spontaneous, but the views expressed, emanating from the individual's identity constructed over time, remain fully authentic. In this report, all names are pseudonyms; sex is indicated by M or F; text is reproduced entirely unchanged.

Respondents and their Placements

The first questionnaire items were factual, seeking to identify respondents' sex, and when, for how long and in what role they had stayed in Senegal. Most of the respondents (25 out of 32 students) were female: this more or less reflects the gender balance of the relevant population, i.e. students on UK specialist Modern Language degrees. The respondents were drawn from thirteen different cohorts; their graduation year ranged from 1989 to 2010: the latter date refers to students who had just returned from Senegal for their final year at Portsmouth, and hoped to graduate a year after completing the questionnaire. The period spent in Senegal covered the 1980s (one respondent), the 1990s (ten respondents) and the 2000s (21 respondents). Many of the work placements were available in successive years, sustained by regular visits from Portsmouth staff (including both authors). Placements included Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working for example in health and micro-finance, press and media (*Radio-Télévision Sénégalaise* offers short news summaries in English), a law office, and English teaching at one of West Africa's most prestigious postgraduate business schools. All are located in Dakar, although some offer scope for working in rural areas of Senegal. The particular placement seems sometimes to have had a determining effect on later career choices: Grace (F), who worked for RTS and later as an English Language Assistant, now occupies a senior position at the BBC, and many now work in the voluntary or charitable sectors. The planned article on outcomes will expand on this feature.

Accommodation

Most initially had a room in an apartment shared with foreigners, though eight lived with a host family. By the end, two had moved into a residence, three remained with a host family, and three were sharing with locals, but the majority were sharing with other foreigners.

Homestay is generally considered to provide a good context for linguistic and cultural learning, although there is wide variation in individual cases (e.g. Jackson 2008), and research results are consequently variable (Kinginger 2009: 130-139). Homestay proved important for Victoria (F), who “had become incredibly close to my Senegalese family” and was delighted to interpret between them and her visiting biological family. Homestay provided the link into wider society for Emily (F), who “really bonded with my host family and many of their family friends, both African and European, meaning that I had a wide group of friends, and not just student friends”.

Homesickness

Homesickness is normal, especially when people are to live in a very different society far from home for an extended period, although respondents did include a few people who had already experienced life in other continents. A narrow majority (17/32) experienced some homesickness at first, but for most the feelings abated—to the extent that some were more sorry to leave Senegal than looking forward to returning to the UK. However, for some the homesickness grew during their sojourn, so there is no simple pattern. Most (19/32) were visited by friends, family or partners from home. Like many other findings—and as in all study abroad research—the intensity and duration of homesickness showed high individual variation.

Language Contact and Language Progress

Whilst most respondents (81.3%) claimed to have learnt some useful words and phrases in Wolof, most of their professional and social communication was in French. The questionnaire items 8 and 9 were adapted from the Language Contact Profile (Freed et al. 2004), which is widely used in study abroad research. However, LCP data is self-reported, so subject to social desirability, and may be influenced by changes in learner beliefs during study abroad: students increasingly recognise the

significance of independent target language interactions (Amuzie & Winke 2009).

Median number of days per week on which students spoke French was seven (mean 6.13), with a median of three-four hours per day. More than half (17) claimed that their French had improved a lot, ten a bit, and five noted no progress but no attrition. The results suggest that study abroad in a country where the target language is a *lingua franca* can bring linguistic benefit even where other mother tongue(s) predominate. According to the study abroad literature, self-assessed post-sojourn proficiency is higher than that obtained by objective measures. However, academics who have been involved with the Senegal programme have noted that it can be easier for UK students to interact with locals there, where a foreigner is a subject of interest and will be engaged in conversation at every opportunity, than on an ERASMUS exchange to France, where the locals may be indifferent to the presence of Brits, and other Brits and non-locals are always around. Although no systematic assessment is undertaken, it has also been informally noticed that those returning from Senegal generally do well on oral assessments: while proficiency may vary, they have lots to say and the confidence to say it.

Duration and its Impact on French and Wolof

18 had spent one semester in Senegal, 14 two semesters. A longer stay allowed different patterns of accommodation and socialisation to occur. No individual remained in homestay for two semesters. Duration of stay was not the determining factor in any of the non-linguistic experiences or outcomes.

Nor is there a statistically significant relationship between duration and French language contact or self-assessed French language outcomes. However, those who stayed longer claim to have spoken French on average on more days per week (6.50 as opposed to 5.83). Interviews should bring out the links between contexts, linguistic functions, frequency and perceived progress.

Longer stayers were also more likely to have achieved a good basic level of Wolof. Speaking the local language at whatever level had a clear impact on social integration. Alan (M), Ed (M) and Lorraine (F) found their ethnicity less prominent, their outsider status less marked and the hassle reduced once they could speak Wolof. Emily noted:

Learning Wolof really makes a difference in this respect, as the locals treat you differently if you make the effort to communicate with them in their native tongue.

Use of Wolof was linked to adoption of other local ways, including dress and transport. One of the British Council assistants summed up language use and assimilation:

trying to learn a few words of Wolof [...] rapidly became an irresistible, obsessive desire to write down every new word [...] and in a matter of weeks, we were able to speak, and the more we spoke, the more integrated we became, and the more integrated I became, the more I enjoyed myself! [...] it's amazing to see how much pleasure you can give someone by speaking their language, and for me, seeing that spark is what makes it all so precious and worth the effort. [Speaking their language] is what I have used to access the Senegalese; from their endless haggling games to leisurely 'waaxtaan' (chats) in the streets...it has enriched all of my experiences, whether visiting someone's family or travelling deep inland. The ability to communicate in Wolof has made my stay here incredibly rewarding, it has been the source of much laughter and happiness and I would urge anyone interested in the programme to learn some.

Enhanced language proficiency is clearly not just a learning outcome of study abroad, but a valuable instrument in the achievement of other outcomes.

Ethnicity

Where incoming students' physical appearance is very different from the majority of local people, it is harder to integrate, and may trigger incidents which will impact upon, for example, attitudes, identity, language and cultural learning, as they did for the Hong Kong Chinese in Jackson's (2008) study. All Dakar informants experienced incidents related to their race in the early days, and for most (87.5%) such incidents continued, although not in local environments where they had become known. This is not unexpected in a country where white faces are very much a minority, even in the capital. The majority of incidents related to "bumstering", i.e. locals begging or trying to sell small items to those identified as European and therefore relatively wealthy, although there were also instances of attempted over-charging, con tricks, mugging or theft. The word "*toubab*" was heard *ad nauseam*, although for most students there was no derogatory intention or hostility attached. In rural areas, many Senegalese had never met a white person before, and were naturally curious. Diane (F) commented that "children were amazed by the colour of my skin and often came to get a closer look". Students might be followed, but most typically the Senegalese wanted to be friendly and to offer to strangers the traditional hospitality (or *teranga*—both Imogen (F)

and Rhiannon (F) use the Wolof word) dictated by local culture—“generally just very good natured interest”, as Lorraine put it.

Imogen found her perceptions of ethnicity clashing with her cultural understanding of age:

Older people who would normally have commanded respect and deference from someone of my age would instead be asking me for money, or treating me with deference, or with wariness and hostility.

If being European consistently drew attention in the streets, it caused no problems at work, except for Fred (M) whose colleagues would recall the colonial past:

in the work place I was regularly subjected to comments like “are you not embarrassed that your grandfathers killed our grandfathers” .

Brian’s (M) experience as a dark-skinned European was exceptional and unsettling:

Senegal is the first time in my life I have received direct racism. This included name calling and being asked to leave shops because I was a nyak. It was quite hurtful at times, as well as quite bizarre given the fact I was experiencing racism from other black people.

Since neither researcher had encountered the term, Brian accepted an invitation to elucidate. “*Nyak*” is evidently a vernacular Wolof word which refers to a non-Senegalese African or more broadly a black person. It can have pejorative connotations. “*Le français de nyak*” refers to the more marked varieties of African French spoken outside Senegal, e.g. in Côte d’Ivoire.

Ethnicity was often linked to gender, and even if the incessant attention was unthreatening and easily handled once students got used to it, “being a white young woman in Senegal can be extremely tiring” (Emily). Imogen drew an explicit parallel:

I felt that the kind of attention that one receives as a white person might be likened to the kind of attention to which women are often subjected. For example, feeling highly visible, receiving stares and comments, and feeling patronised (as people demonstrate what to do in unfamiliar situations, or when one is mocked or perceived as weak or incompetent) may be more familiar to women than to men.

For the present informants, the study abroad experience thus triggered reflection on the different elements of individual identity, and on the role they play in an unfamiliar community of practice.

Gender

Life is gendered to some extent in all cultures, and study abroad is naturally a gendered experience, especially in societies where gender roles are sharply differentiated, as is the case in Senegal. 64.5% of student respondents—1 of 7 men and 19 of 24 women (one no response)—recorded gender-related incidents early on, a proportion which rose to 81.4% (3 of 7 men and 23 of 25 women) by the end of their stay.

Women were very frequently approached by men in the street. Imogen's experience was typical:

I often received attention from men. Sometimes this was persistent and unwelcome, but at other times it simply came from curiosity and interest, and this facilitated friendships - once romantic advances had been deflected!

Some Senegalese men evinced less respect for European women than for their local counterparts, but most were interested in marriage rather than just sex. In Europe, it may be a cultural taboo to ask an unknown woman whether she is married, but not in Senegal. Some students resorted pragmatically to subterfuge. Hannah (F), who was in any case living with her European boyfriend, would refer to him as her husband. Rhiannon "sometimes would wear a wedding ring just to less the likelihood of the marriage proposals". Sherry (F) "often resorted to saying I was married to a Senegalese man".

Victoria, Jackie (F) and the language assistant Queenie (F) found it hard to make real friends with local women, since social contacts with them were limited. And while there are instances in the data of genuine friendships with Senegalese men, initial contacts were often complicated by gender roles, sex, and the fact that marriage with a European woman is a guaranteed route to an immigration visa. In Imogen's words, "in general, I found it easier to make friends with men, given that men were typically more confident, independent and autonomous. Girls my age tended to be shyer around me and didn't have as much freedom to spend time together outside of their homes". Diane put it differently: "I found it difficult to meet any local friends because the girls were all kept locked away by their husbands and the guys would not understand the concept of 'friendship' and would want to marry me after a few hours".

Men found interacting with locals easier, as Hugh (M) noted:

Being of the male gender I think I found it much easier to integrate into the Senegalese way of life.

Tamsin (F) too “was aware that my male friends were more easily able to strike up conversations without then having to field questions about relationship status and assumptions of anything further”.

Anna (F) felt frustrated by “the assumptions that were made about me in terms of being a Western women, especially as the majority of local people I met were men”. And while other forms of behaviour dictated by assumed gender roles were less obvious than the street propositions, both males and females observed how the treatment of Europeans was differentiated by gender in a way that has become less common in the UK. Gareth (M), a language assistant, noticed that, although he was living and working with two British women, “I’d be approached first and spoken to instead of my colleagues”. Wendy (F) concurred, as did Emily:

a woman’s opinion did not seem to be ranked as high as those vis-à-vis males; this I noticed outside the academic world and the workplace, and again this was hard to understand as I have not experienced this in the UK.

Some women felt constrained not to act more independently than local women would do. Phoebe (F) felt that “there was always a certain amount of surprise that I was a lone female travelling and working in Dakar”. Imogen concluded that her Europeanness could outweigh the expectations placed upon her gender: “in some ways my relative freedom afforded me the status of an honorary man”.

Some respondents rejected the different gender roles played by Senegalese women, seeing polygamy for instance as “sexist”. Emily was “shocked” by the inequalities. Imogen perhaps best embodies the liminality and contradictions involved in occupying the third space of the interculturally competent:

In other ways I was still subject to the patriarchal attitudes and expectations of women. I was often torn between wishing to show respect for Senegalese (and Islamic) culture and customs, which would generally elicit approval from Senegalese people, and then not wishing to compromise my own principles and beliefs about women’s equality.

Like ethnicity, gender plays differently in different cultures, and study abroad can lead to adaptive behaviours and sharpened awareness of the relativity of cultural norms.

Social Networks

Social networks, formed soon after arrival but modified over time, are a major factor in the study abroad experience, influencing the extent to which acculturation and learning take place. The typical pattern of study abroad socialisation may be represented as three concentric circles, with co-nationals (compatriots) at the centre, other outsiders (such as fellow study abroad sojourners) in the middle ring, and host country nationals (local native speakers) in the outer circle. Socialisation during study abroad is not uni-directional, but with time, motivation and effort, and with (as always) huge individual variation, there tends to be centrifugal movement. Social integration can be accelerated, for example by homestay, work placement or close personal relationships, but such short-cuts may provide access only to a narrow segment of the outer circle.

Several respondents to questionnaire items 27 and 28 ticked more than one box, evidently to indicate that no single geographical origin dominated their initial friendship group. At the start, as might be expected, social networks revolved principally around other Brits (16 responses) rather than other non-Senegalese (seven) local Senegalese (six respondents), with three ticking both Brits and other non-locals. Both other non-locals and Senegalese became increasingly socially important, with Brits less exclusively so (five, 11 and seven respondents respectively). Brits were also named by the eight respondents opting for multiple answers to item 28, of whom three named Brits and other non-locals, one British and Senegalese, one other foreigners and Senegalese, and the other three all three groups. The substantial individual variation invites further investigation.

Most socialised with (84.4%) and had a close friend (71.9%) among non-Senegalese; seven people (21.9%) reported a new partner who was not Senegalese. At least one of these relationships ended in marriage: in 2009 Ed was living in the US with the American wife he met in Dakar.

Most (28 of 31 or 90.3%: one did not reply) had Senegalese friends, many (18 or 58.1%) close friends, and six students (all females) a Senegalese partner; at least two of these relationships were continuing in 2009. Of the three former assistants, one male met a non-Senegalese partner, and one female a Senegalese partner.

As in Federico's study (2005), Anna's social group formed soon after her arrival:

I found it quite hard to meet people. I was quite a lot younger than the people I worked with so only socialised with them on a few occasions. I had a group of five good friends, two of whom were Senegalese and the other three non-Senegalese that I met early on and we tended to always socialise together.

But social groupings did evolve, as for example with Lorraine:

I was very fortunate to make a really strong friendship with one of my fellow students from Portsmouth, which continues to this day. We were 3 Brits—from Portsmouth—together in fact and fairly inseparable, making friends and socialising a lot together with both Senegalese and other expats. Initially, we were with some Americans who we went around with for the first month or so, but then formed friendships with more Senegalese people and colleagues, and then quite a number of Brits through our work at the British Senegalese Institute/British Council.

Or with Hugh:

At first I got along very well with my host family, but I did not feel I could relate to them, so I made relationships with people [mainly US citizens] who were studying at my place of work. [...] A month into my stay, I met an English guy [...] and we became best friends and our group grew with a French and a German guy [...] The English guy and I started living together beginning of 2006, and lived together all the way until I left. [...] We made many friends who were local, and hung out less with the American students who were coming and going from the NGO. We kept in touch with the families we started our stay with, and went back regularly to their compounds for dinner, social events, etc. In the end of our stay together, I wanted to discover more of Senegal, so I went on long trips to different parts of the country to gather more information for my dissertation, and when I returned, the relationships were not the same.

Students took advantage of whatever openings were available. Although claims made for study abroad tend to be systematic, exactly who our students socialise with is in fact highly serendipitous. For example, Hannah "made friends with a French lady at work, who was married to a Senegalese. She introduced me to her family and I became good friends with her sister-in-law [...] I also made an effort to make friends with Senegalese people in my block of flats and even with my maid."

For Diane, “Meeting other European people was my life line.” However, she persisted and eventually met a Senegalese postgraduate who “understood the idea of just being friends and used to take me to his lovely family who would feed me and look out for me”. For Sherry, “My main social group consisted of other young Europeans, however I also bonded well with my Senegalese colleagues and I was invited on many occasions to their homes and social events.” When Tamsin arrived, the university was closed (not an uncommon phenomenon), and although she socialised well with her colleagues and through her host family, she found to her regret that her circles included few Senegalese. However, she “did get to know a lot of people from throughout francophone Africa” and “made a lot of solid friendships with people from all over the world who were working in Dakar at the time, which I have sustained.”

Chris (M) initially socialised with the three people he had travelled with, but later made “many friends, who were mainly French, Cameroonian, Senegalese, and Canadian in that order”.

Given how often in ERASMUS or American study abroad reports locals are described as distant, hard to get to know, or actually hostile, the Senegalese frequently come across as open and warm:

We met lots of local people who were very welcoming and friendly and would have dinner or lunch with [...] some of the Senegalese friends we made out there were very caring and generous in a way which I think British people very rarely are with foreigners. (Carole (F))

The majority of Senegalese people I met were so welcoming and lovely, work colleagues always invited me to lunch and dinner and welcomed me into the group. (Natalie (F))

Students inevitably came into contact with the British and other Europeans who were living in Dakar. However, Imogen and Jackie soon became disillusioned with the attitudes and behaviour of the expatriate community. The two women’s reflections show how, in a study abroad context, individual differences in attitudes can become more significant than nationality. The insightful comments of Imogen, who worked at the prestigious *Centre Africain d’Etudes Supérieures en Gestion* or CESAG, are worth quoting at length, since they also show how social networks can be reflected in accommodation, and the fact that, in the Senegalese context, as we have already seen, non-local friends are as likely to be African as European:

When I first arrived in Dakar, I moved in to an apartment with the two other British girls working on placements organised from Portsmouth. We rented it from a family who lived in the adjoining house. One of the girls spent a great deal of time with other ex-patriates, and welcomed me into that group. I spent some time with them at first, but found that many of them could be quite negative about Senegal and Senegalese people, and would make a distinction between ‘us and them’ that I didn’t appreciate. Some people I encountered were openly rude or racist, and exploited the status that their race or highly salary afforded them. I found this deeply disturbing and wished to dissociate myself from such people as far as possible.

Other ex-patriates were nice, but seemed to hold a strong attachment to things they missed from ‘back home’ that I didn’t identify with—perhaps because they had been away from home longer or would be away for longer. I had come because I was interested in learning about Senegal and relished all the differences, whereas many of them worked for embassies or organisations that had posted them to Senegal for a certain period before they would move on elsewhere. Therefore many of them did not wish to ‘invest’ in learning about the culture in the way that I did. Perhaps they had had negative experiences of feeling lost or excluded in Senegal, as I had, and they had instead chosen to disengage from the society and to mix with others in similar situations.

I therefore spent a great deal of time with students from CESAG. They were all African, but many were not Senegalese—they came mostly from other West African countries. Teaching English involved facilitating discussions and this was a great way of getting to know people. I loved to hear about my students’ families, experiences and cultures. We would also have passionate debates about African culture, politics and development. I found this all so fascinating and learned a great deal from them. Soon we began to spend time together as a group outside of classes. I had one close female friend from Gabon at CESAG and she and I spent all our time together. We would also hang out with a group of guys from Cote d’Ivoire, Mali, Benin and Burkina Faso.

Later on I moved in with my Gabonese friend and two British girls into an apartment closer to CESAG and all my friends there. It was a really sociable environment and I got to know many more people in the neighbourhood too. By the end of my stay in Dakar I rarely sent any time with ex-patriates, aside from a few close British friends who were also really enjoying their time in Senegal.

Among the former assistants, Gareth “had many friends of many nationalities, but the majority were not senegalese.” Nor did Rhiannon develop close links with locals:

Although I would do things with Senegalese people the notion of 'socialising' and 'friends' is really quite different. So I might spend time after school chatting with people and drinking tea, I have included that as socialising. For me 'friend' refers to someone that I spend a lot of time with and build close relationships with. I spent most time with one of the assistants, one teacher from the BC and another Brit. We were a similar age, had few commitments to other people in the country, arrived about the same time and wanted to engage with the country in similar ways.

However, Queenie's reflections on her year in Senegal (2003-04) echo the narratives of those who have explored, intellectually and emotionally, a cultural territory on the border between the securely familiar and the excitingly new, gaining insights from comparisons between the cultures:

When I first arrived I spent a lot of time with British people who were very different from my usual friends. it took a while to meet people I really wanted to be friends with. I socialised with Senegalese from the beginning, but it took a while to find senegalese people who I was really really comfortable with. I had a relationship with a senegalese man and once I was with him spent a lot more time with senegalese people (his friends and family), but we also socialised with my western friends). By the end of the year I felt I had about 4 really close western friends and about 4 really close senegalese friends. I found it increasingly uncomfortable to hang out in big groups of westerners, particularly as some of them seemed to have no interest in getting to know senegalese people and culture. But my western friendships were really important, as I liked being able to talk about things that they were experiencing in the same way as me. Many of my closest senegalese friends had spent time in europe or USA and so had an interest and understanding in my culture.

Such reflections underline how social networks can be shaped by the interplay between personality, attitudes, affect and the chance encounters which may arise through work or accommodation.

Keeping in Touch

Most students (27 of 30, i.e. 90%: there were two non-responses) had kept in touch with people met during the study abroad, and over half (16 or 53.3%) were still in touch, especially if the experience was recent. All those graduating in 2006-2009 were still in touch. Four had been back to Senegal, while seven had visited friends met in Senegal somewhere outside the UK. Anna "will be visiting a Senegalese friend who is now living in Cote d'Ivoire later this year and it will be the first time I have

seen him since”. Emily, whose homestay, as we have seen, provided access to Africans and Europeans, “really bonded well with a few Europeans, and I’m going to visit one of them in Germany soon”. Queenie was returning to Senegal in December 2009.

Grace, whose stay dates back to 1992-93, says “I have a lasting bond with my fellow Portsmouth student with whom I shared much of my time”. She links friendship and telecommunications:

I have not kept in touch with the Senegalise people I became friendly with. However, this was a given bearing in mind the inferiority of the international communications at that time. In fact, rather than inhibit the quality of the friendships that I made, this acknowledgement of limited communication outside Senegal made relationships very strong and real.

Imogen (graduated 2006) “went to visit a Malian friend in Bamako during the summer, and visited a Burkina-bé friend in Ouagadougou during the next year that I spent in Senegal. I am still in fairly regular contact with all of my close friends from that year”.

Religion, Sex and Communications

Questions about communications with home were designed, like those on religion and sex, to address issues which are highly relevant to the experience and impact of study abroad, but which have not been captured in most study abroad research. Each of the three topics will be addressed more fully in a separate publication, so only a brief note is included here.

All but the most well-travelled individual were led to think about religion: it became a live and divisive issue. The fact that more than one in three found a new partner during their study abroad has implications for identity, intercultural and cultural learning, and language progress, especially for the six students and one assistant, all female, whose new partner was Senegalese.

The growth of travel and telecommunications meant, predictably, that more recent participants had more frequent contact with the UK. The intensity of the immersion experience may of course be diluted if the student is skyping with home every day or two, and in this respect it is misleading to assume, as study abroad literature reviews typically do, that a 1990s context is equivalent to a 2000s context (Coleman & Chafer in press).

Outcomes

Space regrettably precludes covering learning outcomes in detail. At the end of a lengthy questionnaire, yes/no items were used rather than more nuanced Likert scales in order to maximise responses. Table 1 lists the response statistics to items 38 to 42, questions designed, with items 8 to 11 discussed above, to address the six categories of study abroad objectives or outcomes originally defined in the late 1990s and refined since (Coleman & Parker 2001, Coleman 2007, 2009a, 2009b). It is fair to say that the narratives provided evidence to back up claims of personal, cultural and intercultural gain.

Table 1: Perceived outcomes of the stay in Senegal

| | Yes | No |
|------------------------|-----|----|
| Academic | 6 | 26 |
| Cultural | 32 | - |
| Intercultural | 32 | - |
| Linguistic (see above) | 31 | 1 |
| Personal | 31 | 1 |
| Professional | 20 | 12 |

Regarding the reported lack of academic progress, it is worth noting that university attendance was optional and often impractical, owing to the *stagiaires*' other commitments or frequent closures of the university. Only eight (28.6%) had attended university, and another five (17.9%) had attended sometimes, but only two of these felt they had achieved academic outcomes during their period abroad. The fact that three of those who had *not* attended university also claimed to have achieved academic outcomes suggests that some may have been thinking rather of the dissertation which had to be researched and largely written during the period abroad. Those reporting no academic outcomes were probably thinking in terms of knowledge acquired through conventional university teaching. It should also be noted that, in the evaluation of Portsmouth academic staff, the subsequent academic work of students returning from Senegal benefits more than that of their peers from their enhanced personal maturity, although such gains are near impossible to quantify or measure objectively.

Fred alone (graduated 2004) registered no linguistic progress in either French or Wolof. Although he explained that he had good French from living in France and that "the standard of spoken French that I encountered in Senegal was quite low", it is noticeable that his questionnaire makes some negative comments on the local cultures and behaviours, that he

experienced a significant off-putting incident, and that he had already dropped all contact with people met in Senegal. He seems to have “turned the page” on his African experience. The one respondent recording no personal gain was Alan, already a very well-travelled *citoyen du monde* before his time in Senegal.

Longer-term outcomes were manifest, in terms of career, identity and personal journey, but again cannot be fully covered here. All respondents used the linguistic, personal, professional and intercultural skills developed during the Dakar period in their professional lives. The experience very definitely enhanced graduates’ employability, and nearly all have followed a career with international links, especially though by no means exclusively with Africa. About half of the informants work in the NGO or charitable sector.

Conclusion

The study has confirmed that a placement of one or two semesters in Francophone West Africa is an inevitably challenging but ultimately highly rewarding learning experience. Every one of the respondents had gained a great deal from their time in Dakar, but it was never going to be easy: Diane talks of a “hard time”, Julie “not an easy stint”, Grace found it “sometimes scary”, and Lorraine “scary and challenging”. Diane is “not sure I would choose to go through the experience again”. There are tales of stolen passports, of crime, and of fear and isolation beyond those typically encountered in European settings. But the overwhelming consensus is that the stay was “invaluable” (Anna) in countless ways, often awakening an enduring love for Africa while shaping a level of understanding and empathy which are a true mark of education in its fullest sense.

One could debate the extent to which students self-selected for the Dakar placement. Applicants are volunteers, and are screened for their suitability for such a potentially rewarding but extremely challenging sojourn. However, they themselves attribute many of their attitudes and subsequent career choices to the insights they gained and the skills they developed during their time in West Africa. If study abroad can lead to the kind of cultural openness and social commitment which are common factors in the student narratives, then calls for programmes like the Senegal work placements to be promoted and expanded are fully justified.

If funding is obtained, it will be possible to broaden and deepen through interviews the findings from the relatively small-scale questionnaire survey reported here. Topics will include personal and professional identities, social networks and their impact on personal

development, the issues of telecommunication and virtual versus physical location, and the whole question of what lasting benefits students drew from their placement in Senegal.

However, existing findings already vindicate the decision to explore the experience of study abroad in a context hugely different from the home environment. Residence in a country where the target language is not the mother tongue, but has the status of an official language and *lingua franca*, typically leads both to substantial progress in the target language (French), and to acquisition of partial proficiency in the vernacular (Wolof), at least if self-report and anecdotal evidence from programme administrators can be relied upon. The complexity and evolution of social networks reflect the three communities (compatriots, other non-locals and locals) typically found in the literature, but they are overlaid both by the not unexpected ethnic issues confronting Europeans in an African country, and by gender roles. Such roles, and student unfamiliarity with them and uncertainty as to how to deal with them, appear to be one aspect which is inescapable in Senegal but may be less apparent, at least initially, where there is less cultural distance between home and host contexts. The same observation applies very obviously to other aspects of culture, both at a transactional (e.g. taxis, bartering) and a deeper level (e.g. family relationships), and not least to religion: students may return from a *séjour* in France without much insight into Catholicism or the secular state, but Muslim observances in Senegal cannot be ignored, and all our informants had learnt about Islam and other religious beliefs; some had reflected on religion for the first time. While a lasting love of Africa is a specific outcome of the Senegalese placement, other long-term impacts, on subsequent mobility and career choices, reflect earlier findings for language assistants (Alred & Byram 2002, 2006), ERASMUS students (Opper et al. 1990, Teichler 1997) and US students (Dwyer 2004), although the involvement here of several respondents in NGOs and/or developing economies reflects the particular nature of their study abroad placements.

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APPENDIX 1: INITIAL EMAIL TO STUDENT RESPONDENTS

Subject line: Your Experience in Senegal: can you help us?

Dear [forename]

When you were a student, the University of Portsmouth arranged for you to undertake a placement in Senegal. We know that for many people this was a significant time in their lives. Now that the link with Dakar has been in place for over twenty years, we are conducting an academic study to explore students' experience in Senegal and the impact it had on them. We would be very grateful if you could fill in the attached questionnaire.

Please email the completed questionnaire as an attachment to either Tony or Jim.

Most sections end with an open question, allowing you to say as much or as little as you wish about the topic. Longer answers can provide very valuable insights, but we recognise that not everyone will have the time or inclination to add details.

There is no reward for taking part, but we will send those who respond a copy of any resulting publications.

Thank you in advance for taking part in this study, which will help us understand the Senegal experience, and, we hope, improve advice and support for future students, so that they can better appreciate the challenges and potential benefits of residence abroad.

If you are still in touch with any other students who did a placement in Senegal, please pass on this message and/or—with their permission—let us know their email so that we can invite them to participate.

All best wishes from

Jim j.a.coleman@open.ac.uk

Tony tony.chafer@port.ac.uk

Jim Coleman is Professor of Language Learning and Teaching at the UK's Open University. Previously at Portsmouth, he has visited students on placement in Senegal and conducted extensive research on student residence abroad. For a full profile, visit <http://fels-staff.open.ac.uk/jim-coleman>.

Tony Chafer is Professor of Contemporary French Area Studies at the University of Portsmouth. He set up the exchange with Senegal and has been overseeing it for more than twenty years. For a full profile, visit <http://www.port.ac.uk/research/ceisr/members/title.7244.en.html>.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Your identity will remain entirely confidential to the two of us. We intend to aggregate the data in order to gain a representative picture, which we hope to write up as an academic article and present at academic conferences. In reporting the study, we may also quote from individual responses, but if we do so, it will be anonymously: we will ensure that there is no means of identifying the individual participant. You are free to omit any questions you are not comfortable with. You may also contact us at any point after returning the questionnaire to ask that your responses be destroyed, and we will comply with such requests up to the point when data has been aggregated for analysis. No data will be passed to any third party. All the data collected will be destroyed once the study is complete.

Research ethics also require us to provide details of someone who is not involved in the study, but who is aware of the details of it and of the ethical approvals which have been obtained. She is Professor Sue Wright at the University of Portsmouth: sue.wright@port.ac.uk.

APPENDIX 2:

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Click to put an x in the appropriate box

About you

1. Gender ☐ Male ☐ Female

2. Year of graduation:

Placement in Senegal

3. From (month) (year) to (month) (year)*

4. Duration: One semester / two semesters (delete as appropriate)

5. First Employer: Role:

6. Second Employer (if applicable): Role:

** Give approximate dates if you do not remember exactly*

Accommodation

7. Which situation best describes your living arrangements in Senegal?

Initially

- ☐ I lived in the home of a local family, who mostly spoke to each other in Wolof / French / English / other (delete as appropriate)
- ☐ I lived in a student residence
- ☐ I lived alone in a room or apartment
- ☐ I lived in a room or apartment with local peers
- ☐ I lived in a room or apartment with other foreigners

Later on

- ☐ I lived in the home of a local family, who mostly spoke to each other in Wolof / French / English / other (delete as appropriate)
- ☐ I lived in a student residence
- ☐ I lived alone in a room or apartment
- ☐ I lived in a room or apartment with local peers
- ☐ I lived in a room or apartment with other foreigners

Language Use

On average, excluding any French classes, how much time did you spend speaking in French?

8. Typically, how many days per week?

☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7

9. On those days, typically how many hours per day?

☐ 0-1 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 2-3 ☐ 3-4 ☐ 4-5 ☐ more than 5

10. By the time I left, I felt my French had

☐ Improved a lot ☐ improved a bit ☐ neither improved nor got worse
☐ got worse

11. By the time I left, with regard to Wolof, I had

☐ made little or no progress
☐ learnt some useful words and phrases
☐ achieved a good basic level
☐ become pretty fluent

Experiences

Ethnicity

12. In the first few days, I had some experiences linked to my appearance or race

☐ yes ☐ no

13. Later on, I had some experiences linked to my appearance or race

☐ yes ☐ no

14. Add as much or as little detail on ethnicity as you wish:

Gender

15. In the first few days, I had some experiences linked to my gender

☐ yes ☐ no

16. Later on, I had some experiences linked to my gender

☐ yes ☐ no

17. Add as much or as little detail on gender as you wish:

Religion

18. During my stay, the cultural context led me to think about religion

☐ yes ☐ no

19. Add as much or as little detail on religion as you wish:

Links with home

20. At first, I felt

☐ not homesick at all ☐ a bit homesick ☐ very homesick

21. Later on, I felt (delete as appropriate)

☐ not homesick at all ☐ a bit homesick ☐ very homesick

22. Internet use: I would typically contact the UK by internet

☐ monthly at most ☐ weekly ☐ several times a week ☐ daily

23. Telephone: I would typically contact the UK by telephone

☐ monthly at most ☐ weekly ☐ several times a week ☐ daily

24. Did going to Senegal mean leaving a partner in the UK?

☐ yes ☐ no

25. Did anyone from home visit you during your stay in Senegal?

☐ yes ☐ no

26. Any other comments, e.g. what I found particularly different from home, how I handled long-distance relationships, or how it felt to host visitors from home:

Social networks

27. In the early days, my friends were

☐ mostly other Brits ☐ mostly other non-Senegalese ☐
mostly local people

30. Later on, my friends were

☐ mostly other Brits ☐ mostly other non-Senegalese ☐
mostly local people

31. During your stay in Senegal, you will have met other foreigners, both British and of other nationalities. Among this group—or beyond it—did anyone non-Senegalese become

☐ a friend with whom you socialised?
☐ a close friend with whom you could discuss private issues?
☐ a partner?

Put a cross in all the boxes which apply.

32. During your stay in Senegal, you will have met local Senegalese. Among this group—or beyond it—did any local Senegalese become

☐ a friend with whom you socialised?
☐ a close friend with whom you could discuss private issues?
☐ a partner?

Put a cross in all the boxes which apply.

33. Did you keep in touch with anyone after you left Senegal?

☐ no ☐ yes, initially ☐ yes, for a while ☐ yes, and still in touch today

-

34. Have you been back to Senegal to see people?

☐ yes ☐ no

35. Have you visited any of them outside the UK?

☐ yes ☐ no

36. Any other comments, e.g. how your social contacts and relationships changed during your stay in Dakar:

Outcomes

37. Did you attend university in Senegal

☐ yes ☐ no ☐ sometimes

38. Was academic learning a significant outcome of your stay in Senegal?

☐ yes ☐ no

39. Was insight into the local ways of life a significant outcome of your stay in Senegal?

☐ yes ☐ no

40. Was understanding of aspects of professional life a significant outcome of your stay in Senegal?

☐ yes ☐ no

41. Was being able to operate effectively in different cultural contexts a significant outcome of your stay in Senegal?

☐ yes ☐ no

42. Was personal development a significant outcome of your stay in Senegal?

☐ yes ☐ no

43. Any other comment on what you got out of the year:

Employment

44. When you landed your first long-term job after graduating, what role did the residence abroad play in helping you get the job?

☐ no part at all ☐ one factor among many ☐ a significant factor ☐ the determining factor

45. In any subsequent job move, estimate the role played by residence abroad in helping you to get the job. Please tick one.

☐ no part at all ☐ one factor among many ☐ a significant factor ☐ the determining factor

46. In your career since graduation, have there been times when the experience of residence abroad helped you perform your job? Please tick one.

☐ not at all

☐ a bit

☐ a lot

47. Is residence abroad a good investment, i.e. is the expense and time worth it?

☐ yes

☐ no

48. Was residence abroad the most valuable part of your degree?

☐ yes

☐ no

49. Would you like to comment on what contribution—if any—you think residence abroad has made to your working life? You may want to summarise the main features of your career.

Looking back

50. Was your time in Senegal a turning point in your life?

☐ yes

☐ no

51. Do you see the experience differently now, with hindsight, from the way you lived it at the time?

☐ yes

☐ no

64. Has your professional life involved mediating between cultures in any way?

☐ yes

☐ no

65. Any other comments, e.g. about the hopes and fears you had before going, and to what extent they were realised, or about the experience as a whole and its impact on your life:

66. Would be willing to be interviewed by telephone in relation to your time abroad in Senegal?

☐ yes

☐ no

Telephone number:

Best time to ring:

Thank you very much for helping us with this research project!

